

Essentials of Hinduism

'... if a Hindu is not spiritual, he does not deserve to be called a Hindu.'

--- Swami Vivekananda

I. Fundamentals of Hinduism

Basics

Hinduism is based on the spiritual principles and realisations of the sages, which over a great length of time got recorded in the books called the Vedas. Unlike other religions, it has no human founder, and hence its date of origin can never be fixed; it has existed since the dawn of spiritual thoughts in the world. Although the term "Hindu" is of relatively late origin, it has been accepted to signify the religion of the ethnic Indians.

Hinduism does not claim any exclusive right over the spiritual truths it preaches, and it believes that a person can reach the spiritual goal through any path. So it recognises every faith and religion with respect, and at the same time does not approve of religious conversion.

Hinduism -- The Religion and the Society

Hinduism is both a religion and a society, and their practices get overlapped. For example, caste is essentially a social system to safeguard the interests of particular groups with common ancestry. But over the years it has been identified as an integral part of Hinduism, the religion. Similarly, putting on the sacred thread was a religious practice. But later got transformed into a social custom for the upper caste Hindus.

Who is a Hindu?

Religion and Hinduism are synonymous, and hence Hinduism cannot be defined the way Islam or Christianity can be. However, for the sake of convenience, a Hindu is expected to have these basic beliefs and practices:

1. Acceptance of the spiritual truths as preached in the Vedas, and elaborated in any of its sacred books.
2. The belief in the transmigratory nature of the individual soul till it attains *mukti*, the absolute freedom from every kind of bondage and duality. This is the most important philosophical concept of the Vedas.
3. Acceptance of the law of karma, according to which every action produces its result, and does not allow the soul to get liberated till there is any residue of them left, good or bad.
4. Acceptance of oneness as the fundamental truth of existence.

Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, the three main offshoots of Hinduism accept the philosophical beliefs of the Hindus, but do not accept the Vedas as the supreme spiritual authority, and also do not accept the caste system of the Hindu society.

The Fountainhead of Hinduism: The Vedas

Hinduism is based on the teachings of the Vedas. These sacred books are the most ancient preserved literature of the world, and it is difficult to say when exactly these works were composed.

According to educated guess, these are more than seven to eight thousand years old, with the last additions made well before 1500 B.C.E.

The contents of these books are the records of the spiritual realisation of the sages of that period. Some of the *mantras* of the Vedas, including the *Gaytri mantra* are quite popular and are recited regularly by millions. However, very few Hindus read the Vedas, and fewer still understand them. Yet, the Hindu view of existence is shaped wholly by these sacred books only.

The Vedas are also called *Shruti* (lit. heard), since they were passed down from the teacher to the disciple orally, and were considered too sacred to be written down. They are four in number: *Rigveda*, *Samveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharva Veda*. *The Mahabharata* mentions that earlier there used to be only one Veda, but Vyasa divided them into four for easy memorisation. This division is based on poetic metres: *Rigveda* is in *rik* metre (a particular Vedic metre), *Samaveda* can be sung, *Yajurveda* is in *Yajus* metre, and *Atharva Veda* has composition both in prose and poetry.

Everything of Hinduism can be traced back to the Vedas. They contain mysticism, philosophy, devotion, mythology, rituals, code of conduct, ethics, poetry and many other things. Sages and philosophers of later ages, elaborated the ideas expressed in the Vedas to enrich various class of literature.

The religious and social practices of the Hindus keep changing with time, but the eternal spiritual principles, as recorded in the Vedas, continue to be the same. This unique style of dynamic equilibrium gives Hinduism an orthodox core, but a flexible external.

Other Sacred Books

For thousands of years Hindus have been discussing and explaining various aspects of religion. This has resulted in a huge mass of religious literature whose variety and depth leaves one awestruck. Most of these books are in Sanskrit, but every Indian language has its own version and translation of the important works. Because of the sheer volume of the literature, it is difficult for anyone to study them entirely.

The more important ones of these books are:

Upanishads: These are the last sections of the Vedas, but because of their special philosophical nature and importance, they are treated separately. These books contain the philosophical truths realised by the sages, which form the philosophical base of Hinduism. The most important of these truths is the Oneness of everything, *Sarvam Khalu idam Brahma*, and that the individual is one with the universal, *Aham Brahma Asmi*.

It is believed that there are one hundred and eight Upanishads, but ten of them are more famous.

Epics: *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*: These are the two great epics that have served as the hope, ideal and inspiration of the Hindus. These works are not mere stories of the kings and queens, but highlight the struggle of an individual to hold on to religious principles in good times and also during crisis. In addition, they contain information regarding nearly everything that a person may need to lead a healthy life. *The Mahabharata* is also famous for its sheer volume of one hundred thousand verses that makes it the largest epic of the world.

Many classics have been composed in Indian and other South East Asian languages centring the lives of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna. Every Hindu child learns, reads, and knows the main stories of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and the Pandava brothers, and even illiterate Hindus recite regularly from these classics.

The Gita is the most popular Hindu sacred book, and can be treated as the handbook of Hinduism. Composed in mere seven hundred verses, it is a small part of the *Mahabharata*, but stands in its own majesty of poetry, philosophy and spirituality. Devout Hindus recite it daily as a source of inspiration, and also read it aloud when someone dies. With seven hundred verses in eighteen chapters, it contains practically everything of religion, and also the complete philosophy of the Hindus.

The Puranas are eighteen in number and form the mythological base of the Hindus. In total these have around 5.5 lakh verses, through which the popular stories of gods and goddesses are described. The most popular of these books is *Srimad Bhagavata Purana* which deals mainly with the story of Sri Krishna. *Shiva Maha Purana* is another popular work centring Lord Shiva.

The Puranas were composed to suit the needs of the masses for an easy understanding of the spiritual truths. Despite their mythological nature, they discuss philosophy, ethics and rituals of the Hindus in detail, and hence are considered to be complete scriptures in themselves.

The Smritis are the law books of the Hindus which prescribe the personal and social code. The rules laid down in these books cover practically everything -- starting from the most trivial daily acts of an individual, through the duties of a king, to the highest philosophical wisdom that one may require to lead a good life. They are not like the constitution of a country, or the criminal procedure code, but are a means to take an individual to the highest spiritual realisation.

The *Smritis* are based on the principles of the *Vedas*, but have been written for that particular period of time. So, there are innumerable *smritis*, of which the most famous is *Manu Smriti*, written around the second century B.C.E.

The sages knew that a society ruled by archaic laws becomes stagnant. So new *smritis* were codified from time to time according to the need of the age. Unfortunately, no new *smriti* has been written in the last thousand years or so. This has rusted the vitality of Hinduism.

The Tantras are the expansive growth of the ritualistic aspect of religion. Most of these books are devoted to Lord Shiva, or *Shakti*, the female principle of God. Some of the practices mentioned in these books do not meet social approval, and hence they are not as popular as other books. However the books on Tantra are innumerable, and dictate the rituals of Hinduism. In every ritualistic worship of the Hindus, the practises are drawn either directly from the *Vedas*, or from the *Tantras*.

Like every other class of literature discussed above, *The Tantras* are a complete system of thought with a distinct philosophy, mythology and rituals. Even without referring to the *Vedas*, a follower of Tantra can learn everything that is to be known in religion.

The Chandī, or *Durga Saptasati* is devoted to *Shakti*, the Cosmic female principle behind the universe. Composed in seven hundred verses, it is a part of the *Markandeya Purana*, and is considered to be an extremely sacred work. It is believed that a daily recital of this sacred book brings safety and success.

In addition to these, there are thousands of books which serve as the basis for various *sampradaya* (religious sects) of Hindus.

II. Principles of Hinduism

Aim of Hinduism

Hinduism is essentially a practical religion, according to which one get the result of leading a spiritual life here and now. This is in contrast with other religions according to which one must die before one can reap the fruits of his action.

The fundamental principle of Hinduism is to make a person spiritual by prescribing what is suitable for him. For this, it offers four goals of life:

- a. *Dharma*, Righteous living in accordance with religion, which results in a better rebirth.
- b. *Artha*, Acquisition of wealth through rightful means
- c. *Kama*, Enjoyment without transgressing the social and religious norms, and
- d. *Moksha*, Liberation from everything that is by nature worldly.

The first three are for the common people, and the fourth one is for the *sannyasi* and *tyagi*. However, it is expected that every Hindu would give up the world to devote himself fully to spirituality and attainment of *moksha* at some stage of his life.

God

The supreme Reality is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Pure Existence, Consciousness and Bliss), which carries two ideas of Itself -- the impersonal, and the personal.

The Impersonal God is ever present and everywhere present God for whom no adjective can be employed. He is infinite, ever free, without a form, and beyond the grasp of the human mind. This aspect of God is also known as *nirguna nirakara* Brahman (without any qualifying traits and form). He cannot be called a knowing being, because knowledge belongs to the human mind; He cannot be called a reasoning being, because reasoning is a sign of weakness; He cannot be called a creating being, because none creates except in bondage. It is in this form of the Supreme Reality that the Atman is identical with it.

But for a common man it is impossible to think of the Supreme Reality without attributes. So, the ancient sages presented before the public the concept of *Saguna Sakara* (God with form and qualities), who is merciful, powerful, and with innumerable noble qualities. He is the omnipresent creator, preserver, and destroyer of everything. For the follower of this class of devotees, *mukti* consists in coming near to Him and living in Him after death.

The Divinities

It is the Personal aspect of God that is worshipped as the Divine by the Hindus. Of these, Brahma is accepted as the Creator, Vishnu as the sustainer, and Shiva as the destroyer of the universe. Vishnu is also known as Narayana, and is believed to have incarnated as Rama and Krishna in later ages. Of the entire pantheon of Gods, four forms of God: Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, and Krishna are more popular.

The creative principle of God is maintained by *Shakti*, the power of God. This *Shakti* is worshipped by the Hindus variously as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and others. Independent of these, Saraswati is universally worshipped as the goddess of learning.

In addition to these, there are millions of gods and goddesses who represent the various aspects of divinity. According to some, there are in total thirty three crore (three hundred and thirty million) of them, which allows a Hindu to choose a God of his personal liking.

Maya

Why and how does God create this universe? This is a problem that has baffled the philosophers since ancient times. For Hindus also, Creation is a mystery of God that cannot be satisfactorily explained. Different philosophers offer different theories, but the most popular of them is the theory of Maya, according to which, God creates the Universe (seen and unseen) with the help of His own inscrutable Maya (the great veiling power), which by its very nature is something that cannot be described.

Maya is the Divine Ignorance which has an existence only till one does not realise the Spiritual Truth. Thus, Maya exists and yet It does not exist. It is Maya which is responsible for the wrong perception that people have regarding the presence or absence of a thing. Also, the continuance of the universe is due to Maya; and time, space, events, name and form are all products of Maya.

Maya can be compared with the darkness of night that makes objects invisible. When one wants to see this darkness with the help of the existing darkness, it cannot be seen; and when one wants to see it with the help of light, it vanishes. Just like that, maya cannot be seen through maya, and it ceases to exist when the divine light of God realisation dawns upon a person.

The existence of maya as real, unreal, or part real is accepted by every Hindu philosophers. They, however, differ about its exact nature.

Creation

Hindus firmly believe that life is eternal, and that it did not spring out of nothing at some point

of time in near or distant past, as science and many religions will have us believe.

The most popular and accepted theory of creation is that Creation comes into existence by the will of God through Maya, and what we call Creation, is in reality projection. Nature (called variously as *maya*, *Prakriti*, and *Shakti*) is without beginning and without end. At some point of time this gross universe goes back to its finer state, remains there for a certain period, and then once again gets projected to manifest all that is there in the nature. This cyclic creation-dissolution has continued since eternity, and would continue eternally.

Two theories are advanced to explain the process of Creation to the common man. According to one, the will of God creates Brahma, who gets down to the job of creation by meditating on the principles and process of Creation that was there in the previous cycle. With time, the creation blooms in all its majesty.

The second popular theory with the philosophers is that there is *Prakriti*, the Universal Mother Nature, which is composed of inertness (*tamas*), activity (*rajas*), and purity (*sattva*) in balance. For a divine mysterious reason, whenever an imbalance takes place in the triad of these qualities, they start combining with each to give birth to more and more gross objects till the subtle aspects of earth, fire, water, space, and air are produced. These five are not the physical objects that we see around us, but much more fine, and are at the root of everything that is there in the universe. The final creation of the objects of this universe proceeds from the combination of these five elements in a set order, and every object of the universe, including the mind, contains these five elements in varying proportion.

Incarnation

God of the Hindus is beyond Creation and causation. But it is accepted by the Hindus that God expresses Himself in various forms, including human beings. The more accepted theory is that He becomes a human being to give a push to spiritual evolution. Although God is *Mayadheesh* (Lord of Maya), He chooses to become *Mayadheen* (under the control of maya). It is only then that a common man gets a feel of the warmth of the Lord's love, compassion, majesty etc.

This concept of *avatara* -- God incarnating as man, is unique to Hinduism.

Atman

Vedanta, the founding philosophy of the Hindus, is developed on the texts of *Upanishads*, *Gita*, and *Brahmasutras*, according to which, Brahman alone exists -- *Sarvam khalvidam Brahma*.

At the micro level, Brahman is known as Atman, the conscious principle present in every living being. By its very nature Atman can neither be created, nor destroyed. It has all powers, purity, omnipresence, and is full of all knowledge. But due to *maya* (inexplicable reason), the pure Atman mistakenly identifies itself with body, mind and senses. It is then that it becomes transmigratory, and is known as *jivatman*, which is equivalent to the soul of the Semitic religions. Thus there is a fundamental difference between Hinduism and other religions regarding the idea of the soul.

The *jivatman* identifies itself with various kinds of action and their results. It enjoys certain things, and abhors many other things, which makes it work more and more. It thus goes on creating karma -- good and bad. These karma cloud the pure nature of Atman, and makes him forgetful of itself. Instead, it enjoys and suffers in the world. However, since the atman is infinite and eternal, it passes and evolves through various bodies and finally attains perfection and freedom, which is its true nature.

According to Advaita Vedantins, Atman is identical with the Supreme Reality, Brahman; and the multiplicity that is seen everywhere is not real, but is imaginary due to Maya. For many other sages, Atman is related to God in the same way as a leaf is connected with a tree. This view is called **Visishtadvaita**, which was popularised by Ramanujacharya. According to some others, Atman and God are two eternally separate beings and they have the relationship as between a servant and his master. This is called **Dvaita**, popularised by Madhvacharya. In both these systems, Brahman is equated only with God, and not with the Atman.

Hinduism accepts that the true individuality of a person does not lie with his body or the mind, but in the Atman; and the real consciousness does not belong to the mind, but to the Atman. It is the reflected consciousness of the Atman in the mind (which serves like a mirror) that makes one perceive and know the objects of the world. When one's mind is cleansed through *sadhana*, it serves as a perfect

reflector of the spiritual reality.

Karma

The most profound doctrine of the Hindus is the Law of Karma, according to which 'one gets what one earns.' The law has been universally accepted by Indic religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and is now making inroads in Western thinking too.

According to the law of karma, what one thinks is as important as what one does in shaping one's future. This means that the disparity in the world amongst people is not an act of God, but is due to one's own doing. This also means that one has the freedom to change one's situation by performing right action, and thinking right thoughts. This implies that the great questions like predestination and fate have no place in Hinduism. The grace of God, like the widespread rains, is everywhere, and one only has to make use of it through one's actions and thoughts to reap the benefit.

There is no historical point when the karma of an individual became operative; it is as beginningless as maya and the soul. Like a flowing river, one may not know its source of origin, but one can go across it through proper means.

The goal of Hinduism is to go beyond the sway of Karma, which ultimately results in the vicious cycle of birth and death.

Rebirth

The most important fall out of the Law of Karma is the continuation of life in some form to work out one's karma. At the time of death, the individual Atman (*jiva*) leaves the body, along with the mind to take up a new bod. Depending on one's actions and attitude, one may be born in any of the visible or invisible forms, but the best way to work out one's karma is through a human body. For example, an extremely vicious person may be reborn as a tiger or a lion, but only a limited amount of karma would be worked out there. Similarly, if a person is reborn in the heaven, he may enjoy life for a while, but his stock of karma will continue nearly undiminished.

According to Gita, only an illumined person can see the process of rebirth clearly.

Heaven and Hell

Unlike the heaven and hell of other religions, Hinduism believes these places to be temporary places of residence of the soul (which takes up a body suitable for the place to enjoy or suffer) where it lands in its journey towards *mukti* -- the final liberation from the law of karma.

Since no one knows how these places look, the poets of the *Puranas* gave a free flight to their imagination to construct various heavens and hells. However, Vedanta does not pay attention to these trivialities of after life.

Mukti

The goal of every soul is freedom and liberation from every kind of bondage. The ignorance, inherent in every mind about one's true nature (the eternally pure, conscious, and free atman), gives birth to identification with the non-eternal. This gives rise to desires to acquire the pleasurable, and run away from the unpleasant. This results in an individual's compulsion to act and work, which in turn causes more ignorance, more desires and more bondage. The cycle goes on.

The aim of Hinduism is to make a person conscious of this vicious cycle of ignorance-desire-action, which ultimately binds one to the law of karma and makes him suffer and enjoy variously. So, the spiritual practices in Hinduism are aimed at taking one beyond selfish action, and in making him absolutely detached. It is only then that one is ready for self realisation, which leads to the state of *mukti*.

Jivanmukti

The most important achievement of Hinduism has been the idea that a person, even while living, can go beyond the snares of bondage, born of desire, delusion and identification. In that state one realises oneself to be one with Existence. He then realises that he is Brahman, *Aham Brahma Asmi*.

The concept of *Jivanmukti* is the highest concept that has been conceived in any religion, and is unique to the Hindus. The concept implies that one can achieve the highest on this earth itself.

Ethics

Hindu ethics is mostly elaborated in *Smriti* class of literature and deal with every possible issues that a person may come across in his. These code of conduct are not based on what one sage said or did, but on the realistic ground of the ultimate spiritual truth.

The Hindu ethics is governed by the idea that everything is the manifestation of God only. Thus, when one kills an animal or a plant because of his greed or carelessness, he injures his own Atman in some way. Similarly, when one cheats or murders someone, he cheats and destroys his own self in some way.

Sin

Sin has been a serious issue with every religion, and most religions thrive on the fears imposed on the public in the name of sin. But the concept of sin does not play any important role in Hinduism. According to Hinduism, sin is the transgression of certain code of conduct (which themselves are dynamic in nature), and hence not permanent in nature. Sin is more like a mistake which can be corrected.

III. The Practices

Sects

No one knows how many sects are there in Hinduism. In recent times, the growth of sects has escalated, with each sect having its own chosen ideal for worship, rituals, festivals, practices and habits. This makes it impossible to list everything that is practised by the Hindus.

Beliefs

Over the centuries, Hindus have considered these six as ultimately sacred: Guru, Ganga, Gau (cow), Gaytri, Gaya, and Gita. These are being explained.

Guru: Every practising Hindu accepts a spiritual person as his master, who introduces him into the art of spiritual practices. The guru has to be respected as God Himself. Earlier, people used to have a *kula guru* (the family guru), a system which is not practised much in recent times.

Also, every family has a *kula Deavata* (family deity), who is worshipped daily.

Ganga: The sacred river Ganga is considered to be the great purifier for the living and also the dead. So, it is to wish of every Hindu to die on the banks of the Ganga, or at least to have his bones immersed in the holy river, after cremation.

Gau: Hindus have been accepted as cow worshippers from the earliest times, and no practising Hindu will ever hurt a cow. Many scholars opine that cow was not so sacred in Vedic times, but this view is contested.

Gaytri: Every Hindu respects *gaytri* mantra of the Vedas as the most sacred of the mantras, and treats "Aum" as the most sacred sound. The mantra is: 'We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this universe; may He enlighten our minds.' Aum is added at the beginning and the end of the mantra.

Gaya: The transmigratory nature of the bound soul makes it imperative that one offer *pinda* (the offering to the dead) to one's departed ancestors till they get a new physical body. So, Hindus considers it their sacred duty towards ancestors to go to Gaya (in Bihar) and offer *pinda* to repay the ancestral debt.

Gita: This small book of seven hundred verses in the form of dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield is a must read for every practising Hindu. The religion and philosophy of the Hindus owe nearly everything to this small book.

Symbol

Aum, written in Sanskrit, is the universal sacred symbol of Hinduism. It is the nearest equivalent of God, and through its three letters of composition, A,U, M, signifies everything that is there in the universe.

Hindus believe that *japam* (mental repetition) of this symbol, and a meditation on it can get a person everything that he wants in this world, and can also take him to the highest spiritual realisation.

Rituals and Customs

Although many consider Hinduism to be a ritualistic religion, the fact is that rituals are a non essential thing in it. Rituals depend heavily on the local customs, and also on the sects to which one belongs. They are also dynamic in nature, and hence they cannot be universalised.

However, the most popular of the daily rituals are the *panch mahayajna* (the five great daily sacrifices): worship of God, of forefathers, of the poor, of the animals and birds, and a practice of self study of scriptures. Also, guests are supposed to be treated with great respect.

Most *practising Hindus* stick to these practices with due moderation.

The five Mahayajna

The most important ritual of a Hindu householder consists of fivefold daily duties called *Pancha-Mahayajnas* (five great sacrifices). This is based on the principle that a person owes his existence to many beings, both dead and alive. To repay their debts, one must practise these daily sacrifices. The first of these is *Brahma-Yajna* (also known as, Rishi Yajna), dedicated to sages, and is performed by a daily study (*Svadhyaya*) of the holy scripture. *Deva-Yajna* is dedicated to the divine beings, and is performed by the daily ritualistic worship at home and the temple. *Pitri-Yajna* is meant for the ancestors, and is offered by a ritualistic offering to them at the time of noon food. *Manushya-Yajna* is for the humanity, and is performed by feeding guests. *Bhuta-Yajna* is for the animals, and is performed by feeding the birds and animals.

Worship

Hindus believe that God is present everywhere, and yet they worship anything that appeals to their mind. The object of worship ranges from rocks through trees to images. This sense of identifying God with external objects is not due to ignorance, but due to a strong feeling of seeing the manifestation of the Divine even in objects and images. Also, a common mind can identify himself with the infinite only through a concrete object. Hence the popularity of image worship.

Ganesh, Vishnu, Shiva, Sun and Durga are known as *Pancha devata* and their worship is mandatory at the time of ritualistic worship.

Festivals

There are thousands and thousands of festivals in India to celebrate various occasions. But unlike in other religions, Hinduism does not have a set of universally fixed festivals for all. Different festivals are important to different people depending on the sect or the region to which they belong. However, *Holi* (the festival of colours), and *Diwali* (the festival of lights) have universal appeal amongst the Hindus. *Shivaratri*, *Sri Krishna Janmashtami*, and *Ramanavami* are also treated as festival days by most Hindus.

There are also sacred days like *Ekadashi* (eleventh day of the lunar fortnight), lunar and solar eclipse etc. on which special rituals are observed.

Food

Hindus have been quite fussy about food over the ages, but at present only beef eating is considered to be a taboo by the majority. Vegetarianism, staying away from onion and garlic, and other such practices are local in nature.

Castes

Since ancient times Hindu religion has wrongly been tagged with the caste system, which is essentially The Hindu social system. The system was taken up by religion to detail *svadharma* (the duties of a person) for a smooth spiritual journey. In modern times, the system has lost all relevance.

The Last word

Pointing out the fundamental flaw in the Hindu minds, Swami Vivekananda said, "... then and then alone you are a Hindu when the very name sends through you a galvanic shock of strength. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when every man who bears the name, from any country, speaking our language or any other language, becomes at once the nearest and the dearest to you. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when the distress of anyone bearing that name comes to your heart and makes you feel as if your own son were in distress. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when you will be ready to bear everything for them..."
